
Gender Benders

Little boys in high heels, jewellery and make-up seem cute at three, less so at school age. And what if your little girl would rather play footie than dress her dolls? Denise Thornton has some sound advice

All societies treat boys and girls differently and expect different things from them, so understanding about gender is a crucial stage in a child's development. As soon as children understand that they are a boy or a girl, it helps them to organize the way they will relate to the world around them.

You shouldn't panic if your child seems to behave in a way more typical of the opposite sex. Preferring to play with girls may get a boy teased but it isn't that unusual. In most cases this sorts itself out quite naturally as the child develops, though sometimes it happens much later than parents expect (or feel comfortable with!). Even when teenagers are displaying cross-gender behaviour, it generally sorts itself out by the end of the teenage years. Over-reacting may do more harm than good as it can make children feel inhibited and criticized by their parents and peers.

Discovering gender

We become aware of gender differences very early on. By 9 to 12 months most infants can discriminate between male and female faces. At 15 to 18 months old, they can identify features that are typical of men or women such as hairstyles and clothes. And by the age of two they can usually pick out a picture showing a person of their own sex.

But few children understand that a person's gender stays the same and does not change until they are nearing their fourth birthday. As a result children can often pick out pictures of men and women, but a picture of someone who is obviously a man dressed up as a woman will confuse them until they are nearer to five years of age. The lack of understanding that a man is a man regardless of what he is wearing is the reason why so many young children are confused by pantomimes.

By two years old, many children have already learned that certain tasks and objects are associated more with males or females. However, most children are almost five years old before they link personality traits with being male or female. As a result, four-year-olds generally think it is fine for boys to play with dolls, while six-year-olds think it is totally wrong. By the age of nine, children will have changed their attitudes once again, with boys, for instance, deciding that there is nothing wrong in a boy playing with a doll after all.

Once children understand about gender they tend to look for rules to explain how they should behave. At first they are very rigid in the way they interpret their roles, which is why young boys think doll play is wrong - it breaks their rules. As they get older, they realise that lots of things break the rules and they become less worried by doll play, even though they might still feel they don't want to play with the boy concerned.

Nature and nurture

Gender specific behaviour is a complex mix of nature and nurture. Studies point to the importance of both biology and learned behaviour. Children biologically born as boys but brought up as girls (because of freak accidents which robbed them of their male organs and so on) show that some boys take on female characteristics easily, while other studies have confirmed that at puberty boys become more boy like and go on to take on traditionally male jobs despite their girlie upbringing.

Mostly, children learn about gender from watching and copying and then re-enacting their observations in play. Male stereotypes develop faster than female stereotypes. Boys generally choose to be in larger groups and rely on status to organise the group. They tend to learn more from boys, give each other more feedback and expect boys to play boy-type games. Girls typically prefer to make fewer close relationships and are less concerned if girls prefer boy-type activities.

Obviously, children have to understand whether they are boys or girls before they start to choose behaviours which fit their gender. Parents play a key role in the development of gender as they tend to respond differently to boys and girls. For example, parents tend to be more robust with newborn boys than girls. A study from the 70s and 80s, called Baby X, showed that when baby boys are dressed as girls adults respond differently to them. The differences may be so subtle that parents are totally unaware that they have changed their behaviour.

Stereotyping continues, and even intensifies, as babies become children. People give girls different kinds of presents

Dressing-up play

Play is essential for normal development and should be encouraged, particularly pretend and imaginative play. Most three-to four-year-olds love dressing up, to explore how things feel and use their imaginations. If a child constantly wants to dress up as a policeman, few parents seriously believe that he can only be a policeman when he grows up. But if boys carry on dressing up as girls once they pass five years old, their parents soon start worrying. These worries are usually unfounded as most cross-dressing adult males are heterosexual anyway. This is simply another phase your child is going through. Stay relaxed and let him play in peace.

Daniel's story

Daniel's older sister, Miriam, loved dressing up. When Daniel was six he was still playing imaginative games with his nine-year-old sister, often involving him dressing up as a girl, a ballerina or wearing make-up carefully applied by Miriam!

Daniel's parents began to worry when he seemed to be avoiding the kind of games other boys at school played because he thought they were too rough. They had always thought that dressing up was a phase that Daniel would grow out of, but they were increasingly criticised by Daniel's grandparents, who believed they should take a more active line and stop him dressing up. They tried, but Daniel just carried on, hiding in his room quietly so that he wouldn't be noticed.

Things seemed to come to a head when Daniel asked for ballet lessons for Christmas. His parents patiently explained that there were no boys in the ballet class. Daniel said he didn't mind and that he wanted to go anyway. After much discussion, the family agreed. To their astonishment, Daniel showed real talent, the teacher constantly praised him and put him in for exams much earlier than his sister.

Now aged 13, Daniel rarely dances (despite being picked out by the Royal Ballet scouts, who recognized his potential as a young child) as he has lost interest. His parents cannot remember when they stopped worrying - they just did! In the last six months, Daniel has become more 'masculine' and he is more often found in the company of boys. At this same time, his hormonal changes have gathered pace and he is beginning to show an interest in girls - not so much for the companionship he used to enjoy, but as members of the opposite sex.

Daniel's parents believe that if they had sought help for the son, they might have done more harm than good. They wish there had been someone they could have talked to, who could have reassured them that by following their own instincts, they were actually doing the right thing.

What to do if you're worried

If your child is happy at school or in a social situations with other children, and seems to be developing well in other ways, it is most unlikely that your have anything to worry about. Only one child in a thousand has any real difficulty with gender identity and most of these problems are resolved in adolescence.

For parents who want reassurance, it can be difficult finding the right person to talk to. In this country, we are fortunate to have Mermaids, a support group set up to help children and parents with gender identity issues. They can advise from a position of experience, rather than just theory. Mermaids offers support and information to parents, families and carers. The Mermaid helpline is 07020 935066 (12 noon until 9pm [UK Time - Mermaids Editor]) or you can contact them via their website <http://www.mermaids.freeuk.com> or at Mermaids, BM Mermaids, London WC1N3XX

Denise Thornton is a chartered educational psychologist

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*by Denise Thornton
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